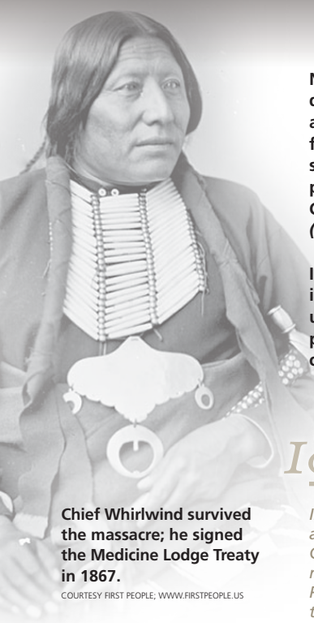
Setting for a Tragedy



Chief Whirlwind survived the massacre; he signed the Medicine Lodge Treaty in 1867.
COURTESY FIRST PEOPLE; WWW.FIRSTPEOPLE.US

Native Americans across the plains grew resentful as white settlement of the West disrupted their nomadic ways. Economic developments and increasingly busy overland and river routes cut across Indian lands and interests. Travelers and settlers competed for grass, water, fuel, and game. To dampen growing tensions the U.S. government signed a treaty with the tribes at Fort Laramie in 1851. In exchange for allowing safe passage for whites, much of the Great Plains was promised to the tribes, with the Cheyenne-Arapaho portion stretching between the North Platte and Arkansas rivers *(see map below)*.

In a few years this arrangement was no longer convenient. After gold was discovered in the Pikes Peak area in 1858, miners, business interests, and homesteaders began using the Smoky Hill Trail through the 1851 Cheyenne-Arapaho reserve. They wanted protection. Then in early 1861, with seven southern states having already seceded and civil war looming, the federal government decided to organize a new territory to secure the gold fields for the Union. To pave the way for the Colorado Territory and protect the routes through it, politicians called for a reduction of the treaty lands. A fraction of the Cheyenne and Arapaho chiefs, including Black Kettle, were called in to negotiate the Treaty of Fort Wise in September 1860. Only six of the Cheyenne Council of Forty-Four and a few Arapaho leaders agreed to a greatly reduced reserve—the northern border of which was the "Big Sandy," now called Sand Creek. Most Cheyenne headmen did not acknowledge or may not have been aware of the new treaty; many still hunted and lived on their old grounds.

Further complicating the situation, Colorado Territory politicians and businessmen—led by Gov. John Evans—aspired to statehood. To improve prospects they lobbied to protect trade along the Santa Fe Trail, bring a rail line to Denver, and create a South Platte River spur off the Oregon Trail. Troubles with tribes in the territory were an obstacle. Anxieties deepened after Confederates invaded New Mexico in a failed attempt to gain access to the Colorado gold fields and transportation routes. Many regular soldiers were committed to the war elsewhere; some settlers and commercial interests felt vulnerable.

In early 1864 Native American raids on ranches and stage stations followed by punitive and preemptive Army expeditions dimmed prospects for peace. Throughout that spring and summer hysteria and fear increased on both sides: From some quarters the cry went up to solve the "Indian problem." Many southern Cheyenne and Arapaho, led by chiefs like Black Kettle, were still dedicated to peace talks, but warrior societies like the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers stiffened their resistance to further white incursion, raiding along the Platte and Arkansas rivers. Events accelerated toward a tragic culmination at Sand Creek.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

1850s

In 1700s and 1800s Cheyenne and Arapaho had moved from Great Lakes to western Minnesota, then North Dakota. Pressure from Lakota pushed them farther west into South Dakota and Wyoming. They adopted the horse and began moving south onto the Great Plains. The 1825 Friendship Treaty formalized relations between Cheyenne and U.S. government.

1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie assigns to tribes a large swath of the Great Plains and promises annuities. Tribes guarantee free passage for settlers along Oregon Trail.

1850s U.S. wars with Plains tribes in Kansas.

1858 Discovery of gold in Colorado.

Capt. Silas Soule's condemnation of the attack was not his first act of moral courage. Son of a New England abolitionist, at 17 he was a conductor on the Kansas underground railroad and at 21 attempted to free two of John Brown's men after Brown was hanged.

At Sand Creek he barred his men from joining the massacre, later writing: ". . . I refused to fire and swore that none but a coward would." Soule testified against Colonel Chivington at the military inquiry in Denver. Serving there as Provost Marshal five months after the massacre, the newly-married Soule was gunned down in the street.
ANNE E. HEMPHILL COLLECTION, COURTESY BYRON STROM

1860s

1861 (Feb. 18): Treaty of Fort Wise greatly reduces 1851 treaty lands. Treaty would turn Cheyenne and Arapaho into farmers; disputed by Cheyenne Dog Soldiers. Supply problems undermine the plan.

1861 (Feb. 28) Colorado Territory organized out of Kansas, Nebraska, Utah, and New Mexico territories. Civil War begins six weeks later.

1862 Dakota War in Minnesota: disputes over annuity payments and treaty violations kill hundreds and cause widespread fear.

1862 Battle of Glorieta Pass, New Mexico: Union victory protects Colorado gold fields.

1863–64 Cheyenne/Arapaho, Kiowa/Comanche raid in Colorado, Kansas, and Nebraska.

COLORADO STATE ARCHIVES

. . . to kill and destroy, as enemies of the country, wherever they may be found, all such hostile Indians.

—1864 proclamation by Colorado Territory governor John Evans

1864

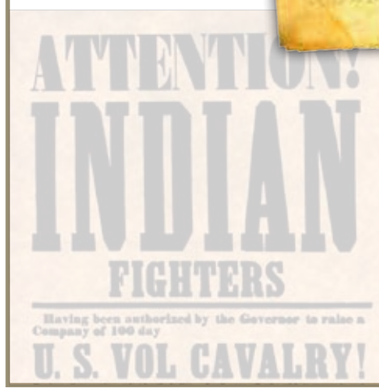
June 11 Murder of Nathan Hungate family is blamed on "Indians." Victims' remains are displayed in Denver, spurring calls for revenge.

June 24 Colorado Territory governor John Evans issues a proclamation to the "friendly Indians of the plains." He tells them to go to designated "places of safety." Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho are sent to Fort Lyon (formerly Fort Wise) on the Arkansas River.

August 11 Governor Evans issues a proclamation authorizing citizens to "kill and destroy . . . hostile Indians." The War Department authorizes a 100-day volunteer cavalry (Third Regiment). Col. John Chivington is given command of the military district.

August 29 In response to Evans' proclamation of June 24, Black Kettle has two educated "half-bloods," including George Bent, write letters to the Indian agent at Fort Lyon, asking for a meeting. They turn over their prisoners and agree to a meeting with territorial and U.S. Army representatives.

to make peace



In response to the growing conflict, territorial governor John Evans called for volunteers *(left)*, promising them "plunder taken from the Indians." Black Kettle asked for a meeting "to make peace" *(letter above)*. Their conference in Denver *(right)* was prelude to the attack.

DENVER SCENE: COLORADO HISTORICAL SOCIETY; POSTER: ALLPOSTERS; LETTER: COLORADO COLLEGE, TUTT LIBRARY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

September 28 Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders, including Black Kettle, meet with Governor Evans and Colonel Chivington near Denver. Chivington tells them to lay down their arms and turn themselves in at Fort Lyon, promising nothing else.

October Evans writes that "winter . . . is the most favorable time for their chastisement . . ." (when the Indians' horses are weak and tribes typically do not make war). Cheyenne arrive at Fort Lyon. Following discussions they go to Sand Creek, where Black Kettle's band is already camped and the game and forage are better. By mid-October about 130 tipis are pitched there. The 700 people are mostly Cheyenne, with a few Arapaho.

November The Third Colorado Cavalry, having seen no combat, has been mockingly labeled the "Bloodless Third." Chivington leaves Denver Nov. 20 with command staff. Companies from the First and Third Cavalry are already en route. Other companies join them along the way.

November 28 Chivington arrives at Fort Lyon with over 850 men. To keep his plans secret, he halts outgoing mail and restricts everyone to the fort. He leaves Fort Lyon that night with about 675 men and four 12-pounder mountain howitzers. Column heads for Sand Creek, navigating by the North Star.

1870s–90

1864 After Sand Creek Cheyenne and Arapaho retaliate, attacking wagon trains, stations, settlements, and ranches along the South Platte River Trail between Julesburg and Denver.

1865–69 Dog Soldiers try to close Smoky Hill Trail.

1865 Treaty of Little Arkansas establishes reservations south of the Arkansas River. Promised reparations for Sand Creek are never implemented.

1867 Medicine Lodge Treaty (never ratified) reduces reservations from 1865 treaty; raids continue.

1868 (Nov. 27): Lt. Col. George Custer leads attack on Black Kettle's band of Cheyenne on the Washita River. Black Kettle is killed.

1868 Ulysses Grant becomes president; promotes "Peace Policy" in relations with Native Americans.

1868 14th Amendment's definition of citizens as "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof . . ." is used to exclude Native Americans. Naturalization is also denied them.

1869 Battle of Summit Springs decimates Dog Soldiers.

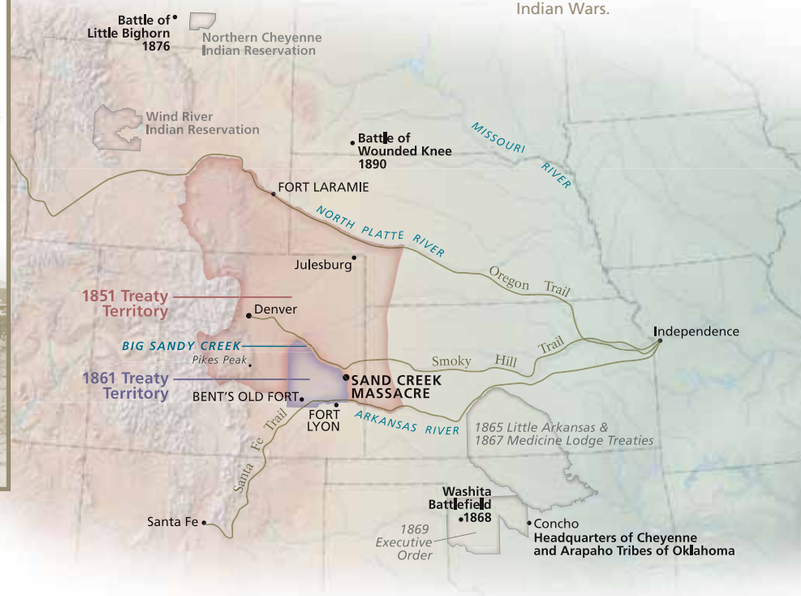
1871 Indian Appropriations Act ends treaty-making, opens era of assimilation.

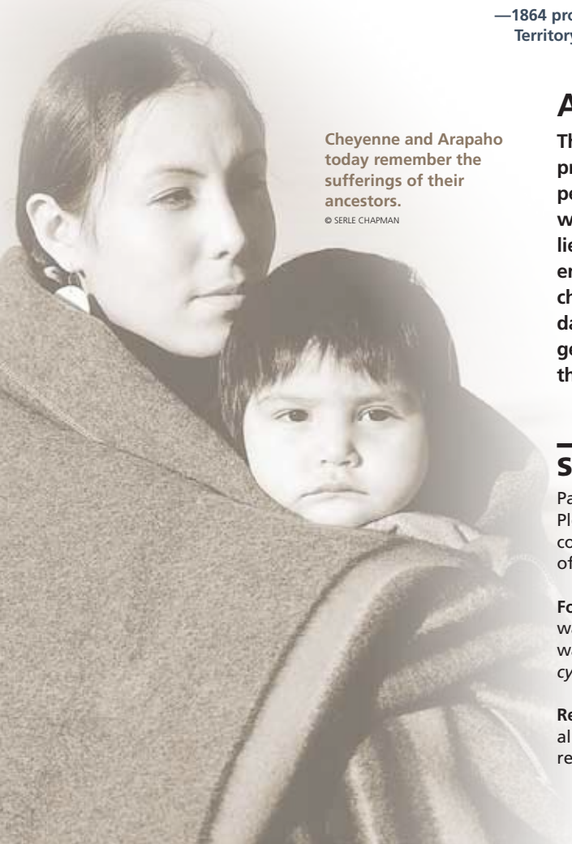
1876 (June 25) Cheyenne and Lakota annihilate Gen. George Custer's 7th Cavalry near Little Bighorn River.

1887 Dawes Act spurs assimilation, dividing reservations into allotments; Native Americans holding land patents are granted citizenship.

1889 Unassigned lands in Indian Territory (later Oklahoma) are opened to white settlement.

1890 Sioux begin Ghost Dance; over 200 Lakota killed at Wounded Knee, S.D.; event is considered end of Indian Wars.





Cheyenne and Arapaho today remember the sufferings of their ancestors.
© SERLE CHAPMAN

Aftermath of the Massacre

The effects of the attack reverberated for years, profoundly unsettling the Cheyenne and Arapaho people. Several bands and their cultural traditions were essentially destroyed. Losses left many families without providers and children without parents. Thirteen Cheyenne chiefs and one Arapaho chief were killed along with any chances for peace, damaging the traditional governing council for generations. The treachery of the attack damaged the credibility of remaining Peace Chiefs like Black Kettle, gaining recruits to the warrior societies. Across the plains, Cheyenne warriors declared all-out war.

Some Denver citizens cheered the returning soldiers, who displayed their human trophies on stage. But some were appalled at the killing and mutilations. The Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War took testimony, finding that Chivington had "surprised and murdered, in cold blood . . . unsuspecting men, women, and children . . . who had every reason to believe that they were under [U.S.] protection . . ." Despite this condemnation, no one connected with the massacre was ever indicted or tried in military or civilian court.

The events at Sand Creek, while setting off a new round of conflict, eventually helped fuel a reappraisal of the treatment of Native Americans. The glaring contradiction between America's ideals and events like Sand Creek, Washita, and Wounded Knee would increasingly trouble citizens. Emphasis gradually shifted from military, economic, and cultural subjugation of native peoples to their "assimilation" into American society in the 1900s. The goal was to turn them into settled farmers and end loyalties to tribe and chief—"Kill the Indian; save the man." This attempt to end the Plains Indians' way of life would only partly succeed due to the resilience of the Cheyenne and Arapaho people.

Sand Creek Today

Park hours are posted on the website: **www.nps.gov/sand**. Please contact the park for updated seasonal hours, upcoming events, or to make an appointment in the off-season.

For Your Safety The park is in an isolated area. Bring water and appropriate outdoor clothing. Please stay on the walking trail at all times. *Caution large vehicles and motorcyclists*: Eight miles of dirt and sand roads lead to the site.

Regulations All pets must be on a leash. Camping is not allowed at the site. See the park website for firearms regulations.

Accessibility The park contact station and some paths are accessible to wheelchairs. Service animals are welcome.

The park hosts special programs associated with the events at Sand Creek and today's Cheyenne and Arapaho. These events, including annual Spiritual Healing Runs and other activities, help to commemorate and memorialize the tragic history and legacy of the Sand Creek Massacre. Please check the park website for dates and more information.

Ferruginous hawk
© STEVE METZ

More Information
Sand Creek Massacre
National Historic Site
910 Wansted St.
Eads, CO 81036
Site office: 719-729-3003
Eads office: 719-438-5916
www.nps.gov/sand

Sand Creek Massacre is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about America's national parks, visit www.nps.gov.

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